DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 598 CG 024 416

AUTHOR Rogers, Russell R.
TITLE Student Development as Professional Practice.
PUB DATE 19 Mar 91
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American College Personnel Association (Atlanta, GA, March 15-20, 1991). For related papers, see CG 024 413-415.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Higher Education; *Student Development; *Student Personnel Services; *Student Personnel Workers; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

In recent years student development theory has been adopted as the guiding theoretical framework of the student affairs profession. Unfortunately, this adoption has largely occurred without a critical analysis of the concept of student development as a gestalt or of the individual theories touted as central to understanding college students. Together the two components of theory and practice embroil the profession of college student affairs in a strong interaction of intellectual learning and the testing of that learning through experience. Here, the artificial gulf between ideas and action (theory and practice) is bridged, enabling professionals to learn ideas for action, theory for practice. Student development theory has offered some significant contributions to student affairs practice and second, student development theory has created some significant problems for student affairs practice. Contributions have included: a needed new role; linkage to the academy and revised purpose; planned development; program and intervention rationale; political savvy; and a research focus. Problems have included: (1) preponderance of theories; (2) diversity in background/preparation; (3) ambiguous directions for application; (4) pragmatic/anti-theory bias; (5) generic, not specific, understanding; (6) indiscriminate use of theory; (7) lack of critique; (8) theory as prescription; (9) theory versus organizing framework; and (10) bandwagon claims. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Student Development As Professional Practice

Russell R. Rogers, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Graduate Program in College Student Affairs
Chairperson, Department of Human Resource Development
Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA

ED348598

(Paper delivered at a symposium presentation, "Professional Leadership in Thought and Practice: A Critique of Student Development" at the National Convention of the American Personnel Association in Atlanta, Georgia on March 19, 1991.)

Abstract

In recent years, student development theory has been adopted as the guiding theoretical framework of the student affairs profession. Unfortunately, however, this adoption has largely occurred without a critical analysis of the concept of student development as a gestalt or of the individual theories touted as central to understanding college students. This paper is part of a larger analysis and critique aimed at critically examining the concept of student development. Its particular focus is to explore the effectiveness of student development theory in guiding professional practice in the field. The ideal relationship between theory and practice is examined followed by a discussion of the contributions and problems that occur when applying student development theory to student affairs' practice. It is hoped that this critique will stimulate further exploration of student development theories and their application to the practice of college student affairs.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Russell R. Rogers

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

CG024416

Introduction

Sooner or later, whatever new idea, concept or fad hits the field of college student affairs, it must stand the test of daily practice. In this regard, student affairs is fundamentally a practitioner field--a fact which, in and of itself, may suggest that student affairs professionals value theory (if at all) only to the extent that it informs their practice. To explore, then, the effectiveness of student development theory as it has "informed" the practice of college student affairs, two vantage points are proposed:

I. What SHOULD BE the relationship between theory and practice?; and
II. What IS the relationship between student development theory and student affairs practice?

What SHOULD BE the Relationship Between Theory and Practice?

Fundamentally, theory and practice should be inseparable. As Kurt Lewin's oft-quoted dictum suggests, "there is nothing as practical as a good theory" (cited in Marrow, 1969, p. 28). Or, stated another way, if a theory were "good", there would be nothing more practical.

Indeed, it is the role of theory (as stated in an earlier paper) to organize what is known and, through such, to generate propositions about what is unknown...all, presumably, to offer direction for practice. Theory, then, offers the basis whereby research incubates its premises into knowledge---the outcome of which is direction for practice. Similarly, practice offers the arena both for applying that knowledge and for generating problems for further theory/knowledge "incubation". Theory and practice, then, are, in the "ideal", inseparable. What a field *thinks* (theorizes) is understood as integral to how that understanding is reflected in its actions/activities (practice). In this regard, the body of knowledge within a field exists to serve as the fundamental rationale for

its practice...offering, according to Greenwood (1957), a conceptual framework internally consistent with the way the field "does business".

Contrary to this "ideal" and to aspirations for rising above basic dualism, many fields suffer from a dichotomy between theory and practice. The development of ways of thinking and talking about the phenomena of a field are divorced from the activity-arena in which the thinking and talking grow from direct experience in the doing. This is not as it "should" be.

What "should" be the case is an integrating or blending together of both. One without the other (thinking without doing or doing without thinking) all-too-readily causes sterile outcomes in either part. Thinking and talking about content---facts, theories, sequences, rules, etc.---(without action) can lead to a verbal glibness which frequently cannot be translated into action. On the other hand, acting on the basis of anecdotal experience and unchecked "judgement calls" (without content) can turn professional practice into an undisciplined playground where practitioners learn precious little about conceptualization, the power of generalization, and the rationale for their field. Together, on the other hand, the two components of theory and practice embroil the profession of college student affairs in a strong interaction of intellectual learning and the testing of said learning through experience. Here, the **artificial** gulf between ideas and action--theory and practice--is bridged enabling professionals to learn ideas **for** action---theory **for** practice. This is what "should", in the best of all possible worlds, constitute the relationship between theory and practice.

What IS the Relationship Between Student Development Theory and Student Affairs Practice?

To best address this question, two broad responses are offered. First, student development theory has offered some significant contributions to student affairs practice and, second, student development theory has created some significant problems for student affairs practice. These opposing viewpoints are elaborated below:

Contributions: A Partial List

(1) **A Needed New Role:** Kathleen Plato (1978) contends that the current practice of student affairs evolved from the functions of controlling student behavior (which eroded with the growth of student self-regulation and the sharing of discipline---once exclusively the role of student affairs practitioners---with faculty and students) and representing student opinion (which eroded with the growth of student rights and the increased numbers of older, adult students able to represent themselves). Given this erosion, "the logical step for student personnel was to expand the remaining role of 'expert'" (Plato, 1978, p. 34). Student development theory, then, offered a mechanism for this change by providing a basis upon which to claim the needed expertise. As Plato writes:

> A new purpose statement evolved that was based on the theories of human development. The model delineated the growth process of the college student and then described the process by which individual counselors or administrators aid this process. All members of the organization are assigned the responsibility for a related phase of the experience.
>
> The "new" approach is broad enough to include all positions in the field from the entry level "worker" to the chief student personnel officer. It is specific enough to denote an area of specialization or expertise, yet it is not so radically different as to be noticed if some institutions choose not to reflect the trappings of the new label. The result is the perfect type of organizational rationale--it gives the appearance of

change, without being radically different from what currently exists (1978, p. 34).

(2) **Linkage to the Academy and Revised Purpose**: Student development theory offers a conceptual means whereby heretofore service-providers (perceived as somewhat ancillary to the institution) are able to link their contribution(s) to the academic mission of higher education and claim an educational role in addition to that of service-provider, i.e., developmentalist, developmental specialist, etc. This revised integration of roles provides many practitioners with a renewed sense of purpose and/or importance in their work.

(3) **Planned Development:** Student development theory provides a conceptual means for bringing "intentionality" and deliberate planning to an otherwise potentially haphazard, yet hoped-for, outcome of higher education, i.e., the whole development of students.

(4) **Program and Intervention Rationale:** Student development theory offers a basis upon which to ground interventions, develop programs, and integrate processes--at the very least, at the level of professional rhetoric.

(5) **Political Savvy:** Drawing upon the linkage of student affairs to the academic mission and the contribution of its expertise pertaining to the student, student affairs practitioners are significantly assisted by the claims and vocabulary of student development theory in justifying positions and protecting and/or building budgets.

(6) **Research Focus:** Student development theory raises a number of questions regarding why student affairs practitioners do what they do and with what effect. This curiosity has spurred some practitioners to probe

their practice beyond anecdotal claims and contribute their findings to the larger field.

Problems: A Partial List

(1) **Preponderance of Theories:** The sheer volume of available theories renders the choice and implementation of an appropriate theory into practice difficult (Stage, 1981). Related to this is the fact that the profession lacks an overarching meta-theory or paradigm within which to incorporate all the key concepts pertinent to the field. Hence, practice based on theory is inconsistent and/or arbitrary at best.

(2) **Diversity in Background/Preparation:** Student affairs practitioners come to the field from a variety of educational backgrounds and work experiences. Indeed, in some institutions a baccalaureate degree may be sufficient for some student affairs positions. Thus, familiarity with individual student development theories may vary greatly ---a contingency which renders common understanding and application difficult.

(3) **Ambiguous Directions for Application:** According to Bloland (1986a), the theories of student development are themselves clear, but the means by which a set of specific practices derives from theory is not. The link is often considered intuitive, logical, or inferential and is even described as such in some of our literature (King & Fields, 1980). Unfortunately, however, this link is seldom direct.

(4) **Pragmatic/Anti-theory Bias:** As with many applied disciplines, student affairs tends to attract practitioners who are pragmatists and who, as such, maintain an implicit or explicit anti-theory bias. As such, student affairs practitioners tend to take great liberties in spanning the apparent

gap between theory and practice. And, as King and Fields (1980) contend, instead of spending adequate time in theoretical considerations, such practitioners lean heavily upon their intuition, personal experiences as a college student, and "...formal and informal discussions with colleagues about *what works* and *what doesn't*" (p. 543; italics added).

(5) **Generic, Not Specific, Understanding:** Unfortunately, the diverse backgrounds and anti-theory bias of practitioners, not to mention the heavy demands on practitioner time, tend to "encourage" what King and Fields (1980) call a generic, rather than specific, familiarity with theory. Hence, practice based on theory may be grounded on no more than a cursory reading of a particular theory, or even worse, the assumption that theory can be grasped when read only in the form of a previously digested, over-simplified handout or grocery list of characteristics, attributes and/or vectors. Theory suffers greatly (as does practice) when it is applied with no greater understanding or sophistication than a pop-psychology and/or jargon-level perspective. The danger here is for one to listen to a few notes and believe he/she has heard the entire symphony--to have a list of Chickering's (1969) seven vectors and, hence, to presume to understand Education and Identity--as a book or a process.

(6) **Indiscriminate Use of Theory:** There is a tendency on the part of some practitioners to attempt to apply theory to all aspects of practice regardless of its appropriateness in a given situation, institution, or student population (Stage, 1990). The forcing of all students and student services into a theoretical framework not only "waters down" the meaning of theory but also seems to suggest an implicit denigration of those

"services" which may not have a developmental impact *per se.* Further, to the extent that theory has been used indiscriminately to alter job descriptions (Bloland, 1986c), if not the primary function of the field itself, student affairs practitioners may have neglected the development of other roles they might play in meeting the needs of students and providing just plain "good service".

(7) **Lack of Critique:** Both Bloland (1986a, 1986b) and Plato (1978) have noted the almost unwavering acceptance of student development by the profession and called for a healthy dialogue and critique regarding its merits. The lack of such a critique has resulted in an inconsistency in the choice of theories used in practice as well as a "brass-ring-like" devotion to the concept of student development as a gestalt (Stamatakos, 1987). Even more importantly, it has given rise to the unwritten assumption that theories are universally applicable and that any perspectives to the contrary are tantamount to professional heresy.

(8) **Theory as Prescription:** Bloland (1986c) has questioned the tendency to use student development theories to predict outcomes. As he mentioned in his earlier critique of student development research and evaluation, many research studies in the area of student development have either mixed results or questionable internal validity. Thus, the question which remains unanswered is whether theory-based interventions result in "the enhancement of student growth beyond that which might be expected in the normal course of events" (Bloland, 1986b, p. 1). The evidence to date by no means universally supports that it does.

(9) **Theory Versus Organizing Framework:** While the literature is replete with articles on theory-based practice, in reality few, if any,

practitioners or faculty actually apply theory to practice in a pure form. Rather, the tendency is to take individual concepts or commonalities of theories and develop an organizing framework for designing interventions (King and Fields, 1980; Stage, 1990). Again, this results in both a lack of consistent choice and application of theories and a consequent difficulty in comparing the efficacy of individual theories across programs and settings.

(10) **Bandwagon Claims:** In the theories themselves and/or in the assumptions of applying said theories, the premises of intentionality and romantic humanism may well have overstated what is possible. Something in daily practice begins to suggest that perhaps Victor Frankl's assertion merits some consideration. Frankl (1959) contends that self-actualization cannot be a matter of direct intention and that it, indeed, becomes self-defeating to intend one's own development as a primary purpose. What one can intend is meaning; development is a secondary outcome. Additional "second thoughts" emerging from daily practice tend to temper the euphoria of student development theory and lend credence to William James' claim that,

> ...healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it positively refuses to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best keys to life's significance, and possibly, the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth (Epigraph, Becker, 1975).

In short, practice reveals the exceptions and/or the "dark side" of the human psyche rarely addressed by theory. A bandwagon approach to theory, then, soon falters on a broken axle (or two) of ineffective intentionality or perhaps even the existence of evil. As such a bandwagon, student development theory may well be vulnerable to adoption by

educational faddism rather than reasoned scrutiny---a malady to which education is all-too-often prone across all of its subsets, not just student affairs.

References

Becker, E. (1975). Escape from evil. New York: Free Press.

Bloland, P.A. (1986a). A time to speak...student development: The new orthodoxy? Part 1 ACPA Developments, 13(3), 1, 13.

Bloland, P.A. (1986b). A time to speak...student development: The new orthodoxy? Part II ACPA Developments 13(4), 1, 22.

Bloland, P.A. (1986c). Student development revisited: A friendly critique. Unpublished paper presented at the Fall Conference of the California College Personnel Association.

Chickering, A.W. (1969). Education and identity. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Frankl, V.E. (1959). Man's search for meaning. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Greenwood, E. (1957). Attributes of a profession. Social Work, 2, 44-46.

King, P.M., & Fields, A.L. (1980). A framework for student development: From student development goals to educational opportunity practice. Journal of College Student Personnel 21, 541-548.

Marrow, A.J. (1969). The practical theorist: The life and work of Kurt Lewin. Annapolis, MD:BDR Learning Products.

Plato, K, (1978). The shift to student development: An analysis of the patterns of change. NASPA, 15(4), 31-36.

Stage, F.K. (1991). Common elements of theory: A framework for college student development. Journal of College Student Development, 32, 56-61.

Stamatakos, L.C. (1987). A time to speak...Student affairs' brass ring: An allegory. ACPA Developments, 14(3), 1, 18.